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ABSTRACT

An ongoing qualitative cross-cultural research project, using ethnographic methods of immersion and reference to the lived experience, is addressing the high rates of Indigenous youth suicide in remote Kimberley (Western Australia) communities. To ensure that cultural sensitivities are observed and work toward valid data collection and analysis, local research assistants are being trained to interface between the research team and local peoples. It is hoped that this training will raise local individuals' skill levels as well as produce meaningful data in these remote communities. This paper explores the issues encountered in building cultural bridges through the research assistants' training. A network of community contacts and interested parties was used to invite possible research assistants, and it was decided to accept all who applied. Eight trainees took part in 9 days of training. Participants were evenly divided by gender and whether they lived in a town or remote area, but most were younger than 30. After initial discussions about confidentiality and respect, training sessions were problem-centered, focusing on who should be interviewed about youth suicide and how the interviews should be conducted. In addition to developing potentially useful interview procedures and increasing trainees' skills and self-confidence, the training also increased understanding and communication between the two cultural groups. The researchers' developing understanding of Aboriginal notions of kinship and "shame" is discussed. (Contains 13 references.) (SV)

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Research: A Cultural Bridge

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Research: A Cultural Bridge

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Abstract

Cross-cultural research brings one to the interface where personal, moral, and cultural sensitivities are active. This qualitative account takes as its context the vexed questions of Indigenous youth suicide, immersion into a culture not one's own, listening across cultural experiences and the training of Indigenous research assistants to ensure that the inclusion of local peoples is not eroded.

In June and July 2001 a qualitative research project, using ethnographic methods of immersion and situating what is heard within the lived experience, is addressing the tragic experiences of high rates of Indigenous youth suicide in remote Kimberley W.A. communities. Local reference groups of community representatives, personal approaches to gatekeepers and clear ethical principles guide the research. To ensure cultural sensitivities are observed and work towards valid data collection methods as well as analysis, local research assistants are being trained to interface between the research team and the local peoples. It is hoped that this training will raise personal, local skill levels as well as achieve meaningful data in these remote communities. This paper explores the issues of building bridges between these communities by means of the research assistants' training.

Introduction

This paper reports an episode of research training. This training was with Indigenous people, many of who were youth, to assist a research project to be conducted in remote Indigenous communities. Those trained came from diverse ages, backgrounds in terms of urban or remote community living and cultural immersion. This paper reflects on the training experiences over the fortnight's duration and offers considered opinions that might enable researchers to re-image what research is, especially as it applies to research across cultures or cultural interfaces.

The episode of research training and this paper itself are conscious expressions of respect for persons and culture. Thus principles of ethics, informed consent and ownership are of pre-eminent concern.

The subject of this paper

This paper is not reporting the research to be conducted on Indigenous youth suicide. That project is one that is planned for development early in 2002. This report focuses on an approach to the access of suitable co-researchers and facilitation of their skill acquisition. While taking a

specific example of one such project, the importance of this paper is its more general application to research projects that seek to cross cultural boundaries and in particular to the training of research assistants.

Nature of this report

This paper respects the complexities of working across cultural boundaries. Whenever one culture seeks to research another culture or groups of people immersed in a different culture there are rightful concerns about the sensitivities of the researchers and their processes. This paper attempts to explore some practical attempted solutions to the potential problems of such research. To this end it will be useful to briefly sketch the base research project.

The first author is based in Perth and has expertise in methodology which will be utilised in the training envisaged in the project. The second author is a doctoral student with many years of lived experience with the local people and an ongoing commitment to both the region and its people. She will be doing the field work of the project, working with the research assistants and the communities and their leaders.

The Research

A PhD project is attempting to gain insight into the problems of Indigenous youth suicide in some of Australia's remote Aboriginal communities. The majority of the completed suicides reported are of young men. The chosen methodology of the research project is qualitative and a broad range of informants is required. At the foundation of the project lies the belief that this dreadful waste of lives is not always an individual problem – it is also a community problem. Families and communities live and attempt to cope with this ongoing tragedy, and all people are touched by the effects. Thus it will be necessary to interview both men and women, both young and old, in these remote communities. It is also planned to speak to and be informed by community service organizations, health and service providers and other individuals situated in the communities or with specific insights to the problem.

How could a white Australian do this work, talking to men and women of strong cultural traditions, about a most sensitive area of personal and cultural life?

Supporting the research project

Since it is planned to include a number of communities within this study, the usual ethnographic response of immersion and accumulated trust is not feasible. It was planned to develop a group of people, drawn from these same communities, to interview within the communities. As this idea matured a number of things became apparent. Firstly, the sense of a group of Indigenous research assistants was seen as an improvement and added richness of the research project rather than another level of complexity. Secondly, it was clear that this group of research assistants would need to be carefully selected and carefully trained. Thirdly, that this group of assistants would enable further dimensions of the research field to be better explored. Lastly, as community members were to be critical data sources for this project, research assistants of each gender would be required. This paper tells the story of the training of the research assistants.

Developing the research project has been a long process. Based on personal relationships going back many years, this project was crystallised by a number of deaths in communities in the region. The expressed dilemmas of local people to themselves understand the causes of these problems lay the seed of an idea to focus on Indigenous youth suicide. As this idea grew there were many consultations with local people. The support of local community leaders was requested and given. Community leaders were visited, their own ideas explored and ways to sponsor the research investigated (Smith 1997). A Federal research grant in 2001 under the National Suicide Prevention Strategy (NSPS) gave the initial funding to get started. The ongoing consultations with communities and their leaders and the establishment of an Aboriginal (Research) Reference group have ensured that there are considerable levels of expectation and interest in this research. This interest was tapped to further the idea of training research assistants.

An ARC Small Grants award established the funding of the proposed training of research assistants. The training envisaged was multi dimensional. While the main overt focus would be interview skills and how to conduct interviews in culturally appropriate ways, there were other issues that will be developed below. Briefly these issues involved: research ethics and concerns about confidentiality; assistants' self-care and appropriate involvement; support services and plans within the research process for all participants; and conduct of the research team while travelling and living in the communities.

Personnel

The network of communities and interested parties was used to invite possible research assistants. These contacts were requested to nominate people suitable for the role of research assistant. A flyer was sent to the local Aboriginal Resource Agencies and committees inviting nominations, and it was decided to accept all those who made contact. As a number of people would be coming from remote communities, funding would support their travel expenses, a nominal per diem, training materials and daily accommodation and meals over the initial fortnight of training. At the same time a venue was located. This venue was both convenient to suitable accommodation and sympathetic to the aims of the project, well regarded within the community and the focus of the support structures being developed for the research process. These supports would be qualified counselling, if required, and appropriate referral to other agencies.

The training was planned for the latter part of June 2001. Nine participants were expected and most were young adults. Some came from remote communities and some came from the local town community while having kinship links with other remote communities. Planning of the research training proceeded in consultation with people on site to ensure that the process was both gradual enough to be useful and respectful of cultural issues to be engaging and possible for the participants. The intended procedure was that the group, presenters of the training and participants, would collegially develop the research process.

The training would run for nine full days of a fortnight. While the nominal duration was 10 days, transport timetables to return to communities at the end of the fortnight required that nine days would be available. The fortnight was seen as the most reasonable timeframe balancing participants' other commitments and obligations with the desire to maximise learning.

Eight participants commenced the training period. While the eight were equally divided by gender and whether they lived in a remote or the town community, the majority were aged less than 30 years. Three took up the offer of accommodation and had transport arranged to and from

the town. The group met informally on the Sunday night to start work on the following Monday morning. The site of the training was away from the accommodation so all required transport although those based in town provided their own. The full group met at the training site where refreshments and the midday meal were also planned.

Working during the days

Sessions were run by the authors with input and advice from the counsellor in attendance. While the first sessions were spent discussing general issues for the group, the main focus was problem centred. The problem was simply stated: How can we, the group of participants, find out useful and appropriate information about youth suicide. This was broken down into WHO should be spoken to (interviewed or contacted) and HOW (conduct of interview) can this information be gathered. Seven days were spent exploring how to conduct the interviews.

Dealing with cultural sensitivities

Part of the very first days was a discussion about the ways the group would work together. The eight participants with the two research trainers, the authors, and the counsellor running the training venue formed the group of eleven people. The concepts of confidentiality an appropriate self-disclosure were introduced and discussed. There were some mutually agreed rules. These were:

1. We respect what is said within the group. No conversation outside the group would be said in a way that might bring disrespect on the group, its members or what it was doing.
2. We show respect for personal stories shared in the group.
3. If we do not understand, we ask. Asking for explanations is a sign of respect for the person.
4. If we think someone does not understand, or seems to lack respect, we say so in a respectful manner and offer to explain and make clear.

There were some practical consequences of these agreed rules. The first consequence was that a list of local Aboriginal "creole[1]" words (Malcolm 1993) was kept and added to, by both the youth and the older presenters, of unfamiliar terms or meanings. Creole has become very commonplace in both general usage and even in schools (Harris and Sandefur 1994). This was a constant reminder that "using the same words does not require one to be communicating (the same thing)". This was a public and visible sign of respect for Aboriginal culture that acknowledged linguistic differences in usage (Foley 2000). More importantly was a commitment to reopen previously negotiated ideas as participants would want to explore other aspects of previously covered material. While at times this felt, at least to one author, like going over old ground again and again it was actually a more concentric encounter (Smith 1996). It was a spiral approach to dealing with topics that allowed exploration from positions of comfort, trust and mutual respect. It soon became apparent that 'respect' was a most powerful word. 'Respect' is noun, verb, metaphor and relationship. It is this last sense that the sense of cultural sensitivity was crystallised (Cadet-James 2001). Lastly, and in consequence of the preceding moves, the

[1] Creole is a simplified variety of English developed in the community. The meaning of Australian words differs in the meaning and context of Aboriginal languages.

boundaries between 'presenters' and 'trainees', 'researchers' and 'research assistants' had to be re-examined in our minds (Smith 1996). It was clear that the project had involved a transfer of traditional researcher power (Backhouse 1999, Tsey 2001) and that our own models were more aptly summed by 'co-researchers'. Even this metaphor will be challenged in a later discussion.

The main work of the training was problem focused. Recognising the difficulties of developing an interview schedule from the ground up, the authors developed an outline and later a series of questions for the schedule. These questions were made the problem: after understanding why this information would be important, how can it be asked in culturally sensitive ways?

The first part of this work each day was focused on the white board. Questions were explored, their wording and respectfulness examined. This was done by brain-storming and large group discussion, often followed by breaking up into smaller groups and later reporting back to the whole group. It was a rare event for a single word to survive from the initial starting point of the author's suggestions. Questions and whole lines of inquiry were debated, scrapped, partially accepted or re-worked and modified in content, sequence and language.

There were a series of information sessions. These sessions focussed on the ideas and purposes of research, the differences between research and counselling, and strategies for self-care. These strategies included dealing with their own negative and sad feelings, what to do in the event of suicide ideation, and ways to talk about the research progress and its subsequent reporting to stake holders.

The second part of the day was employed using the questions in practise sessions within the group. Small group work, all-in discussion, role plays, fish-bowl practice interviews, imaginative exploration of the variety of possible interviewees and their responses honed skills explained and modelled (Stewart 1999). Multiple types of interview practice were used. Practice in small groups, with an audio tape recorder either one-to-one or in front of the group, and also in front of a video camera was employed. Sometimes one of the authors took a particular role, at other times participants took turn with each role. The research interviews were to be audio taped. So, while part of this work was about familiarising each person with the technology and format of a research interview, it was also about confidence building, exploring personal responses and how the emerging interview schedule 'felt' for the prospective research interviewees.

The last couple of days of the fortnight were used to bring the whole interview together as an organic unit. The focus of the practice for each person was how to use the schedule to respectfully gain an insight into the interviewees thinking about the issues raised. To this aim fish-bowl interviews and video recording of interviews was used. The video was a particularly challenging medium for many as it was capable of evoking a strong sense of shyness.

Closure

The nature of the training and the experiences shared during the training called for a careful sense of closure. These concluding sessions were led by the counsellor and addressed three main issues. The first issue was that of on-going confidentiality and respect for the stories and parts of people shared within the group. The second issue was whether people would freely offer to continue to be part of the research project. It was recognised that the training could be valued by a person who at the same time could decide to not be involved in the interview stage of the research project. This matter was explored and negotiated so that the selection of co-

researchers was announced to general satisfaction. The last matter was this paper itself. In keeping with the chosen values of respect and informed consent, the authors agreed to allow all participants to read and comment upon this manuscript and seek their permission to present and publish this text. Hence, reading this paper is an assurance that the participants have given their consent for the story of this cultural bridge to be published.

Outcomes of the training

There were several outcomes from the training. The first outcome was an interview schedule that has increased likelihood of engaging potential interviewees and being culturally sensitive and respectful. The second outcome was a group of participants with increased self-confidence having completed a significant training experience. It is hoped that this training will increase their employment prospects as well as their skills. The third set of outcomes are some profound changes in the authors who have gained a more grounded insight into what cultural awareness might be and a sense of progress when working with culturally sensitive issues. It is to this third set of outcomes that attention will be turned.

Limitations of the group and study

Before exploring the outcomes of the research training it is beneficial to contextualise this research. There is no attempt herein to claim that the experiences of the authors are of universal application. The authors came to this effort with a clear sense of purpose that was embedded in commitments to work with and for people in remote Indigenous communities rather than use them as the subjects of research. There was the recognition that the work required more than the authors could provide as neither was of Indigenous origin and could not expect people to be able to respond to an anglocentric view of research. Much of this was based on previous experience of inadequacies of survey style research for people in communities with limited interest in written communication and much more focused on face-to-face modes of communication. Further, the sensitivities of dealing with serious issues, possibly involving people who have died and certainly invoking family and skin relationships required people who are known by the local people and part of their local community networks. Since it was determined that the research was not to be limited by the availability of people already possessing these attributes, it was determined to train willing and suitable people.

The context of the study limits its applicability. What may be of wider interest is the experience that research training enables a bridge between cultures to be built and cross-cultural explorations to be made in a safe and privileged environment.

The metaphor of a bridge

Many of us live in a city divided by a river or other landform feature. While we might travel from home to the other side to work, shop and visit friends there can be a discernible sense of being more at home on 'our' side. The bridge is a means of communication and interaction.

The cultural experience of the Indigenous people we worked with was diverse across a wide spectrum. Some lived in town, had studied in the major state capital of Perth, and used their own mobile phones to contact peers and family. It might be said that these people could live outside their culture in the Europeans' world. Others lived in a remote community and of these

some had never been to a city larger than the regional centre or lived outside their own dominant culture. Yet these differences did not reflect cultural affinity. Ease outside one's culture does not indicate distance from one's culture or loss of one's culture. So there was diversity within the group of cultural exposure. Similarly there were members who had experienced cultural initiation and others had not. While there were age issues active, there were also matters of family, individual choice and opportunity within skin relationships. These matters were not explored within the group out of respect.

The bridge metaphor pertains to the whole experience of the fortnight's engagement. It may be useful to isolate some significant examples of how this metaphor can be applied in order to promote understanding of the power of the bridge metaphor. There are two matters that can be explored with the metaphor of cultural bridge. These are skin relationships and shame. Skin relationships are those claims that go beyond family in the narrow European understanding of family as sharing one or more common ancestors eg grandparent. Shame is that strongly negative sense of stepping outside one's limits: to an outsider it might first be interpreted as shyness.

It was striking that the participants had a very strong sense of being Aboriginal that was not related to inheritance. Whether one was clearly a full-blooded Aboriginal or could claim Indonesian or European forebears made no difference to the profession of Aboriginality. Furthermore, kinship held across groups far wider than family. Individuals could claim 'skin group' with community members distant and remote and these claims were carefully checked by recounting whom one knew and how one was related to them. While at first guess this might sound like the concept of tribe, it had none of the exclusion of tribe – belonging to one tribe precludes belonging to another, whereas 'skin group' builds on a sense of inclusion. Hence the claim 'we are all the same here' met with unanimous approval within the group. This led to a dialogue that sounded like a single definition of the word 'culture' as in Aboriginal culture, but this is misleading. 'Culture' was more often used as a comparison to European ways i.e. not 'culture'. The usage was based on "In our culture…" that overarches differences in tribes based on language groups and ceremonies. Hence Nadioc[2] Week is a celebration of being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island descent and culture. This sense of 'culture' unites across difference of language group, whether initiated (been through the Law) or not, living in European situation or in a remote community.

The vehicle of research training allowed exploration of the spectrum of meanings of culture. It allowed discussion of whom one was related to and the specific degree of relationship and its basis. Thus the terms 'uncle', 'aunt', 'grandparent' and 'cousin' could be explored beyond their more narrow European/Australian accepted meanings. Clearly 'cousin' was a term that included even the distantly related people not always but usually of the same age as the speaker. In this sense the term 'cousin' claims a relationship that is not closely bound by blood but is firmly fixed within the context of the social interactions of the skin group for people of either gender of about the same age as the speaker. These concepts could be readily discussed in contrast to the more narrow European meanings and their differences and values explored. Part of the reason why this discussion of relationships was so open was people's clear interest and pride in their relationships with one another. There was a strong sense of "**we** are Aboriginal", so exploring and discussing how we are related is usual, accepted, reinforcing and acknowledging

[2] A week of cultural celebration that is organised by Indigenous peoples and focuses on Indigenous culture expressed in song, dance, art and story. This week of July is becoming a central focus of Aboriginality in both urban and country communities across Australia.

that of which we are proud. It became clear from these discussions that access and approval of the forthcoming research efforts in the communities would depend even more than the authors had anticipated on these relationships. Hence the cooperation of co-researchers would be a large step towards gathering relevant and important data which could not be gathered without them.

One concrete 'bridge' was the explicit use of language and its differentiated meanings. It is a common experience that Aboriginals use language to distinguish between themselves and outsiders. This is not an uncommon function of shared meanings. The cultural bridge between researchers and trainees was based initially on their sharing of their differentiated meanings of particular words. The connection between language and culture is embodied in 'Aboriginal creole'. Making our want to understand and their sharing these meanings to the extent that we developed a board full of meanings became a concrete example throughout the training. Hughes (1987) explored ideas of Aboriginal epistemology wherein Aboriginals have their own uncultured understanding of what is knowledge and how to gain know. It is felt that the process described in this paper has been sensitive to Aboriginal learning styles and it is thought that this sensitivity built on learning opportunities.

This sense of Aboriginal identity bears upon some gender issues we had anticipated. Knowing that we, the authors, were moving across gender sensitive matters and what might be discussed among males or among women might not be able to be discussed between the sexes was part of the need for researchers of each gender. In approaching this matter in the workshops it was to some surprise that there was little alarm about gender matters. The matter did come up a few times and was dealt with by the group with a simple statement along the lines of "that is (wo)men's business and we cannot discuss that here (in the big group)". But there was a more potent sense of 'Aboriginality' and saw that they themselves may be able to help put together a process that will be important for their people. There were common expressions of "this is a serious problem (youth suicide)" and "we must do something". This is the sense of bridge. The research artefact[3] enabled each group to move out of a comfort zone and make deliberate steps to increase understanding and communication for the benefit of both sides.

The second area we want to explore is that of 'shame'. The term should probably be italicised since it is a code word for a complex of feelings and emotions. And it should be accepted that this concept is only partially understood by the authors, and hence to some degree the bridge is still being constructed.

How was the term *shame* used? The term was used when a person was silent, not answering a question or invitation, avoiding eye contact even of the sidelong kind: it was a term of which it could be asked "are you feeling *shame* here?" and the response might be an affirmative shake of the head or other body gesture. This goes beyond shyness as might be usually expressed among Europeans. *Shame* has resonances of being singled out so that the individual is unduly the focus of attention, of the inexplicable, of deep feelings for which there are no words, a fear of trespassing across boundaries that may be sacred, a sense of being powerless and ineffectual. *Shame* is not something most can talk about, one suspects simply because it is so inexpressible. *Shame* is clearly not the same as the dictionary definition of the tem in English usage

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[3] The term artefact is used to highlight that a research setting, and even more so the training for research, is an artificial situation of comparatively short duration but high intensity.

> Shame (n) 'the painful feeling arising from the consciousness of something dishonourable, improper, ridiculous, etc., done by oneself or another (Macquarie Dictionary 1991).

How does *shame* differ from the dictionary meaning? It is not a single feeling but rather it is a set or group of feelings. It does not arise from a sense of an act by oneself or another, more it comes about due to attention or circumstances. The dictionary definition has an active sense; shame arises as a consequence of an action, shame comes from within. Yet *shame* engulfs one and disempowers and arises, in some real sense, from outside oneself.

> "Shame carried a much stronger meaning, particularly when it indicated Aboriginal people had lost face in their relationship..." (Munns 1998 p.3).

Thus there is a strong sense of fracturing the relationship, yet this connection and relatedness is what makes communication possible. No wonder that *shame* results in silence and lack of power. *Shame* is a form of social control that directly targets personal dignity and it is more than emotion (Horton 1994). *Shame* is linked to the importance of kinship ties and the extended family and is one of the most painful and powerful experiences for Aboriginals. *Shame* is a leeun which is a creole term meaning, in part and partially, a 'gut instinct', the deepest feeling of heart and gut, something that well up from within and must be acknowledged beyond the rationality of logic or arguable fact.

This bridge metaphor has enabled some understanding to be gained by the authors of *shame*. In that sense some crossing of the bridge has been achieved. Yet the sense of *shame* achieved neither helped the person experiencing *shame* to recount it, because the experience so disempowered that only others could speak for him/her, nor enabled participants to develop resilience to *shame*. Hence, while one party may have used the bridge to explore another side of the experience, the reciprocal journey has not yet been accomplished.

Conclusion

This paper brings to the surface some important guidelines for research with a focus on cross-cultural issues. It is the belief of the authors that research on cross-cultural issues must have as a priority an attitude that one culture is not better than another while it may be different from the dominant culture on one of the participants. It is clear that such research highlights the importance of personal identity. This paper has explored how respect for personal identity is linked to culture within the perceptions of many participants. As part of our process, we have experienced how willingness to learn from personal experiences develops an openness to change: change in attitudes, changes in beliefs and/or values, and possible change in acceptance. Further, change is itself a two-way process. Real change requires mutuality and the foundation of this mutuality must be respect.

The sense of respect is of critical importance for researchers interacting with Aboriginal cultures. Mutual respect is possible and is the necessary pre-requisite that learning and change occur. When two cultures interact in agreed, purposeful events and projects mutual respect establishes the conditions necessary for change and learning to occur.

Lastly, it is apparent the "*shame*" is a powerful force in Aboriginal culture. Further, we still struggle to understand its nature and antecedents, how it develops as a cultural instrument and its personal consequences. At the moment we are 'still on the outside looking into' this very

active and powerful social force, so much effort needs to be made to understand how Aboriginal cultures can free themselves of the overtly negative ramifications of '*shame*'.

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